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ABSTRACT

Much of the literature on widowhood has focused on coping and adjustment following the death of a spouse; only recently have social/psychological relationships among the widowed become the subject of investigation. To examine the activity patterns and well-being of elderly widows living in a Florida retirement community, 48 widows were contrasted with 48 randomly selected married women. The two groups were matched on demographic variables and perceived health in order to control confounding effects in interpreting the marital status/well-being relationship. Widows had lower life satisfaction and a lower activity level than married women. As the sample was drawn from a predominately married population, the lower activity of widows may have been either self-imposed or the result of rejection by others, as a social exclusion hypothesis would suggest. Overall analyses found a significant positive correlation of engagement varibles with life satisfaction. However, activity level was more highly related to morale among the widowed (whose activity level was lower than that of married women). The results emphasize the importance of social involvement for the psychological well-being of the widowed. (Author/WAS)

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THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL PARTICIPATION ON MORALE AMONG WIDOWED WOMEN*

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SUMMARY

This study investigated the activity patterns and well-being of elderly widows living in a Florida retirement community. Forty-eight widows were contrasted with 48 randomly selected married women. In contrast to most other studies of widows' well-being, this study matched the two groups on demographic variables and perceived health. Confounding effects in interpreting the marital status/well-being relationship were thus controlled. Widows had lower life satisfaction ($p < .01$), and a lower activity level ($p < .05$) than married women. As the sample was drawn from a predominately married population, the lower activity of widows may have been either self-imposed, or a result of rejection by others, as a social exclusion hypothesis would suggest. Overall analyses found a significant positive correlation of engagement variables with life satisfaction. However, activity level was more highly related to morale among the widowed (whose activity level was lower than that of married women). Results emphasize the importance of social involvement for the psychological well-being of the widowed.

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INTRODUCTION

The majority of literature on widowhood has focused on coping and adjustment following the death of a spouse (c. f. Strugnell, 1974; Berardo, 1978). The study of social psychological relationships among the widowed has only recently been the subject of empirical investigation. For example, it is notable that none of the 62 articles in Neugarten's (1968) classic gerontological reader explicitly dealt with issues related to widowhood. In Berardo's (1968) pioneering paper on widowhood, he commented on the need for research which investigated the particular problems of the widowed. Lopata (1971) made a similar observation in her paper detailing the "minority-group" status of widows.

Much of what is known about the widowed has come from research which has used marital status as only one of many predictor variables, rather than having a direct interest in the widowed subpopulation. In a major review of the subjective well-being of the elderly, Larson (1978) concluded that marital status is a reliable predictor of well-being, with widowed people less well off than married. In a recent review of the relationship of recent life events to health among the elderly, Garrity and Marx (1980) noted that the widowed are more likely to be in poorer health; to have lower psychological morale; to have a greater incidence of depression, and other psychological disorders; to have a higher suicide rate; and ultimately, a lower life expectancy than married people of comparable age and socio-economic status. Widows have also been found to be financially insecure, (Neale, 1981a).

Increasingly, researchers have looked at social and psychological variables among widowed groups (Lopata, 1970; 1979; Morgan, 1976; Gibbs, 1978). As widowhood is predominately a female experience[1], it may not seem surprising that most research in the area has focused on women rather than men (see Berardo, 1970 for a discussion of widowers).

Widows tend to be more socially isolated than married women (Lopata, 1971). In addition to losing the daily interaction with the spouse, there is frequently a certain amount of support system withdrawal from the widowed woman. The widow may find that she is no longer included in social circles comprised of couples (Lopata, 1970; Gibbs, 1978; Berardo, 1968, 1970; Blau, 1961).

While some studies have found loneliness and social isolation to be frequent consequences of widowhood, Petrowsky (1976) found that elderly widows experienced a greater frequency of interaction with same sex friends than married individuals. The respondents in Petrowsky's study were randomly selected from Alachua County, Florida, a region characterized by a disproportionate number of widowed compared with the U. S. as a whole. It may be that isolation among the widowed declines with the opportunity to interact with other widows. This would be consistent with the findings of Blau (1961) in her examination of the structural constraints on friendships in old age.

Morale

In her study of the relationship between widowhood and morale, Morgan (1976) found that when income, employment status and family interaction variables were held constant, there was no difference in the morale of married and

widowed persons. However, health and age were found to be related to the morale of the married and widowed groups differently. Widows who were older or in better health had higher morale than their married counterparts. This last finding supports the work on morale among widows by both Lopata, (1979) and Blau (1961).

The large body of literature dealing with the life satisfaction of the elderly has confirmed the importance of frequent social contact for maintaining morale (e.g., Lemon et al, 1972; Tobin and Neugarten, 1961; Adams, 1971; Knapp, 1976; Larson, 1978). Social readjustment following the death of a spouse is often conceived in terms of social activity (Pihlblad and Adams, 1972; Ward, 1978).

Some types of activity seem to be more strongly related to adjustment in widowhood than others. However, there is not a consensus as to what type of activity is the strongest predictor of life satisfaction among the elderly widowed. A number of studies have indicated that among the widowed, friendships and peer relationships are more strongly related to morale and well-being than are familial ties. Ward (1978), Arling (1976) and Pihlblad and Adams (1972) have all noted that while family ties are usually closer during crisis periods, there is a tendency to rely on friends more than on relatives for regular companionship. Friendship and neighboring may be more satisfying to the elderly widow because the relationships are based upon common interests and life styles.

Graney (1975) found happiness and participation in voluntary associations to be positively related in a four year longitudinal study of healthy elderly women who lived alone. He did not report marital status, and so these women weren't necessarily widowed, although statistically, most would be expected to be widows.

Scope of this Study

This research investigated social engagement among a sample of elderly widowed and married women living in a retirement community. There is no previous research which has studied widows in such a setting. The aim of this research was to investigate the generalizability of previous widowhood research findings to a sample of well elderly who had moved into an age-segregated retirement community. Of particular interest was the question of whether differences in psychological well-being exist when widows are matched with married women on health and financial adequacy.

METHOD

This study reports on the relationship between life satisfaction and activity level among the widowed and married women in a Florida retirement community. The data reported here was collected in 1978, and is a part of a larger data set on voluntary relocation conducted by the Elderly Care Research Center (ECRC) at Wayne State University.

Procedure

The sample was drawn from the Century Village retirement condominium community located in Deerfield Beach, Florida. Constructed in 1975, Century Village is estimated to be the largest retirement project in the United States, with an approximate population of 15,000. Century Village residents are generally an active, middle income, healthy elderly group. Century Village was built for middle-income retirees, (units for year round residents rented in the range of $350 to $400 per month in 1978 when the data was collected. Most residents own their condominium.

The resident council (made up of elected residents) had one of six alternate questionnaire forms (and stamped addressed return envelopes) distributed to all community residents in the course of the regular monthly delivery of the area newspaper to each residential unit. Residents were introduced to the study via both an introductory cover letter as well as a newspaper article describing the project in the issue of the paper which contained the questionnaire. Residents were assured that their participation was voluntary, and yet encouraged to fill out their questionnaires and mail them as soon as possible. The follow-up procedure used to boost return rates was a small article in the community newspaper reminding residents to return their questionnaires.

Response Rate

Four hundred fourteen (414) individuals responded to the particular questionnaire used in the following analysis. Forty-five percent (n=187) of the respondents were married men; 41% (n=171) were married women; 12% (n=48) were widowed women; and 2% were widowed men. The response rate was estimated at 40% by the ECRC.

All 48 widows were selected for further study of the relationship between life style and well-being. Sex differences could not be examined due to the small number (n=8) of widowed men. A comparison sample of 48 married women was randomly selected for comparison with the widows. All 96 respondents had migrated to Florida from the north-east coastal region.

Measures

The questionnaire used in this study contained multi-item measurements of the following concepts: life satisfaction, deprivation, self-concept, informal activities, organizational memberships, friendships, and attitudes about Florida, as well as demographic items. This paper will report on the life satisfaction - activity level relationships. A more thorough treatment of response patterns to the entire questionnaire is found in Neale (1981b).

Measurement Instruments

Wood et al. (1969) Life Satisfaction Scale

The life satisfaction measurement was the thirteen item LSI-Z from Wood et al. (1969). This scale is a subset of items originally used by Neugarten et al. (1961) to measure the construct of life satisfaction along the five dimensions of zest; resolution and fortitude; congruence between desired and achieved

goals; positive self-concept, and mood tone. Only ten of the thirteen items used by Wood (1969) were used to create the life satisfaction score. Three items were not included because of poor psychometric properties in the present sample. The final ten item scale had an alpha reliability coefficient of .761 when using the entire sample (n=96). Wood et al. (1969) reported a KR-20 test reliability of .79 using thirteen items

Measures of Social Engagement

Social engagement was assessed by two types of engagement measures: the amount of time spent in various activities, and the number of formal organizational memberships held.

Activity Scale

The questionnaire contained seven items which asked the respondent how frequently she engaged in a variety of activities ranging from working for pay to visiting with friends or neighbors. The reliability of this scale as measured by the Chronbach's alpha was .627 for the entire sample of 96 women.

Organizational Memberships

Formal organizational memberships were measured by asking the respondent to indicate the number of seven types of organizations she belonged to. Total scores were computed by simply adding the number of groups each person said she belonged to. The reliability of this scale was .598 for the entire sample combined (n=96).

Description of Sample

There were no differences between the married and widowed women on the demographic items of age, country of birth, education, occupation, religion, financial status, or health. Thus, these variables cannot account for any differences found between the groups.

The respondent sample of both married and widowed women can be described as having a mean age of 68 at the time of questionnaire administration, with 80.6% being U. S. A. natives, and 14% being European born. The average education level was twelve years, with 32% having attended college, 17% of whom had some post-graduate work[2].

About 80% of the sample indicated some type of occupation beyond housekeeping during their younger years. (44.2% were office workers; 8.4% described themselves as professional; 8.4% were business owners; and 9.5% were business employees.) The bulk (88.4%) of the sample was Jewish, and all were white, which is representative of the general Century Village composition.

Ninety-one percent of the entire sample (n=96) rated their financial means as either "just enough", or "comfortable" with "more than enough". Only 8.7% of the widows stated their financial status was inadequate: that they "can't make ends mett", but widows were not significantly more financially troubled than married women. While we do not have figures of actual income, the level of overall

satisfaction and perceived financial adequacy of the respondents suggests financial security as a group.

There were no health differences between married and widowed women. Most widows (75.1%) rated their health as either good or excellent. The majority of widows (72.9%) also stated that their health had remained stable over the past year, while 16.7% believed themselves to have improved, and 10.4% said their health had worsened.

RESULTS

Differences between married and widowed women

Widows were found to have significantly lower life satisfaction than married women ($t=2.99$; $d/f=84$; $p < .01$). While this finding is consistent with other researchers, it is particularly noteworthy in the context of the present study, because the potentially confounding effects of health, income and age have been eliminated as causative factors.

Widows also had a lower informal activity level scale score than married women ($t=2.26$; $d/f=94$; $p < .05$). There were no differences between groups on level of organizational participation. In addition, there were no differences between the two groups on any of the individual items which measured activities or organizational memberships.

Relationship Between Life Satisfaction and Social Engagement

Table 1 presents correlations of life satisfaction with activity level and organizational memberships for all women (n=96).

Table 1

Correlation matrix of life satisfaction with activity level and organizational memberships

	1.	2.	3.
1. Life Satisfaction	1.0	.26**	.23*
2. Activity Level		1.0	.52***
3. Organizational Memberships			1.0

Table 1 shows that life satisfaction has a significant positive relationship with both measures of social engagement.

Table 2

Correlation matrix of life satisfaction with activity level and organizational memberships

WIDOWED WOMEN

	1.	2.	3.
1. Life Satisfaction	1.0	.37**	.24**
2. Activity Level		1.0	.59***
3. Organizational Memberships			1.0

Table 3

Correlation matrix of life satisfaction with activity level and organizational memberships

MARRIED WOMEN

	1.	2.	3.
1. Life Satisfaction	1.0	.07	.35**
2. Activity Level		1.0	.48***
3. Organizational Memberships			1.0

*p < .05
**p < .01
***p < .001

Tables 2 and 3 show correlation values of these same three variables for married and widowed women separately.

Insert Tables 2 & 3

Tables 2 and 3 show that life satisfaction is more strongly related to activity level among the widowed than it is among the married women. This is not true for the life satisfaction-organizational membership relationship, which is non-significantly higher among the married.

DISCUSSION

Previous research on the widowed suggests that the widowed women who participated in this study were unusual. These women did not demonstrate the poor health and inadequate financial status that widows typically manifest when compared to married women. In essence, these crucial variables which usually distinguish the widowed from the married were held constant in the two groups. Thus, the widows who participated in this study were more healthy and financially stable than many of those that previous research has reported on.

The gerontological literature is replete with studies that emphasize the importance of good health in the psychological well-being of the elderly. In addition, health has been found to moderate the social engagement/well-being relationship. The major findings reported in this paper are that differences in morale and inform activity level exist between married and widowed women even when health and socio-economic variables are held constant. Thus, the present research suggests that the previously established finding that the widowed have lower life satisfaction than the married is quite robust in that it prevails within a relatively advantaged group.

Widows had a lower overall level of informal activity than married women. Such a lower level of activity cannot be explained by possible problems such as a lack of transportaion or opportunities, as there were many social activities and an excellent transportation system available in the retirement community.

One possible explanation for this difference in activity level is that widows may have had a smaller group of (widowed) peers available than the married women (as the majority of Century Village residents were married). Past research has indicated that in addition to losing the daily interaction with the spouse, there is frequently a certain amount of support system withdrawal from the widowed woman. The widow may find that she is no longer included in social circles comprised of couples (Lopata, 1970; Gibbs, 1978; Berardo, 1968, 1980; Blau, 1961). Bereaved people may find that others shun them in an attempt to avoid the whole issue of death and grief, and ultimately, their own mortality. Lopata's (1971) widows stated that their married female friends changed in attitude toward them and became suspicious and fearful that the widows would become interested in their husbands. The present data do not contain specific information as to the marital status of social contacts. However, segregation along

marital status lines is a plausible explanation for the data.

The widowed were less active than the married, yet their activity level was more strongly correlated to their responses on the life satisfaction index. This is a second finding of major importance: the widowed had both lower morale and activity level, and these two variables were more strongly correlated among the widowed. Thus, we may conclude that social contacts have greater importance for the widowed, perhaps precisely because of a need to fill the role loss resulting from the spouses' death.

This research also underscores the importance of developing diverse typologies of widows and the varied lifestyles available to the older widow. Examples of such will be found in research which directly examines widowed groups, as opposed to the more frequent treatment of marital status as a predictor variable.

In conclusion, the results from this study emphasize that previously established differences between widowed and married women prevail even in relatively advantaged groups, such as in the present sample. This study point to the robustness of differences in morale and activity level, even when the issues of poverty and illness have been eliminated. Of particular relevance to the widowhood literature was the greater importance of informal social activities on the morale of widowed women relative to married women.

FOOTNOTES

[1] In 1978, 52% of the women aged 65+, and 69% of those over 75 were widowed. Among men, the corresponding proportions were 14% and 23% respectively (U. S. Census Bureau, 1978). In addition, women are much less likely to remarry after the death of their mate, and if they do remarry, they do so after a longer interval than men (Treas & VanHilst, 1976; Cleveland & Gianturco, 1976). Of course, women are likely to live longer as widows, because of their longer life expectancy. The mean life expectancy for white women aged 65 was 83 years in 1975, whereas white men at 65 could only expect to live 13.2 additional years (Shultz, 1976).

[2] This sample of elderly women is more highly educated than the general population in this age bracket. U. S. Census data (1978) indicates that 22.0% of white women over 65 have graduated from high school; 8.3% have some college education, and only 6.2% have a college degree or beyond. That this sample of interstate migrants has more education than the average for their cohort supports Biggar's (1980) finding that interstate migrants are from higher educational and income ranks than local movers, who are more economically dependent.

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